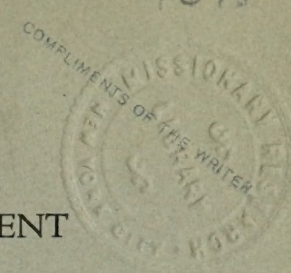


Sam.  
Misc.

C. H. 1401  
427.2

1675



THE INFLUENCE OF GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT  
UPON RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

BY

R. H. WHITBECK

University of Wisconsin

REPRINTED FROM

THE GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

Vol. V, No. 4 (April, 1918)

AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY  
BROADWAY AT 156th STREET  
NEW YORK









## THE INFLUENCE OF GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT UPON RELIGIOUS BELIEFS\*

By R. H. WHITBECK  
University of Wisconsin

In his "History of Mankind" Ratzel says:<sup>1</sup> "Ethnography knows no race devoid of religion, but only differences in the degree to which religious ideas have developed." Tolstoy ("What Is Religion?") is even more emphatic: "... never in any society of men since men first became rational creatures could they live or have they lived without a religion." Notwithstanding such unequivocal declarations, there are reported cases of tribes in Australia, Tasmania, and some islands of Oceania among whose members no evidence of religious ideas could be detected. Such tribes, however, have been exceedingly rare; moreover, the utter absence of religion among them is not admitted by all who observed and mingled with them.<sup>2</sup> It is almost universally true that mankind, wherever found, has possessed some beliefs that were essentially religious. Among the very lowest of these superstitions is the fetish worship of the negro tribes of Africa. In the main, this consisted of a crude worship of inanimate objects—even stones, or pieces of wood—believed to possess some charm or magic.

### SCOPE OF THIS ARTICLE

With this or similar irrational superstitions of the lowest races this paper does not deal. Rather is it concerned with religion in the middle stages of human culture; religions which were the product of thoughtful observation of natural phenomena; those religions which represent the human mind groping for an explanation of the seemingly supernatural. Most of these religions belonged to peoples who have a recorded history and who have left a literature, hymns, or sacred books—the Aryans of India, the early Persians, the Egyptians, Hebrews, Norse, and Teutons; or people of more recent time but not high culture whom modern scholars have studied, such as the North American Indians, the Aztecs, the Incas, and the tribes of Central and Northern Asia. Among such peoples, wherever they existed, there has always been found a religion befitting their stage of culture and clearly influenced by their geographical environment.

---

\* The writer wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Miss Annie Kirch, formerly a graduate student in the Department of Geology and Geography in the University of Wisconsin; also the criticism of the manuscript by Professor W. L. Westermann of the Department of History.

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Ratzel: *History of Mankind* (translated from the 2nd German edition), 3 vols., London, 1896-98; reference in Vol. I, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Bousset: *What Is Religion?* (trans.), New York, 1907, pp. 1 and 11.

## FACTORS IN RELIGION

Many factors combine to mold a people's religious beliefs. Geographical environment necessarily is one of these—sometimes a conspicuous influence, sometimes only perceptible in minor ways. In certain of the old religions, that of Greece for example, made up of elements borrowed from many sources and modified by the contributions of many peoples through a long past, the influence of geographical environment had nearly ceased to be distinguishable. As a matter of fact, most of the historic religions of the Mediterranean region and southwestern Asia had had a long evolution and had acquired this composite character when we first know of them, yet all of them reflect the influence of the lands and climates in which they grew, and some of them to a notable degree.

Why should it not be so? Would anyone expect a people's religion, or philosophy, or literature to grow up without being influenced by the physical environment amid which it unfolded? In the very nature of things any system of religious belief, in order to grow into acceptance as a belief, must be in some sort of harmony with the mode of life, the economic interests, and the geographical environment of the people. It is obvious that if a tribe or group of tribes came to believe in the existence of certain deities, they must have had experiences which engendered these beliefs; for such beliefs grow out of experience, however distorted or illogical may be the deductions from it. No small part of the religions of the type with which we are dealing grew out of man's early attempt to explain the phenomena of nature which he saw about him but which he could not comprehend. For example, he had not the slightest knowledge of why it lightened, thundered, or rained; why the wind blew, or the winter came; why the sun rose and set. To him all such phenomena were mysteries, and he tried to satisfy his mind concerning them by inventing fanciful myths as we now invent more scientific hypotheses.

## BASES OF MYTHS

Tylor considers that all myths are early man's inventions to satisfy his desire to know "why?"<sup>3</sup> Andrew Lang regards them as savage man's way of satisfying the early form of scientific curiosity.<sup>4</sup> He says that savages give personality to sky, wind, sun, earth, etc., and think of them as beings of some sort actuated by such motives as they themselves entertain.

Max Müller inclines to the belief that religion grows out of "man's sense of the Infinite as awakened by natural objects calculated to stir that sense."<sup>5</sup>

Bousset says: "Everything that is unusual, strange, or unexpected

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Tylor: *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols., London, 1871.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Lang: "Mythology" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th edit., Vol. 19, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> F. Max Müller: *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, New York, 1891.



attracts the religious attention of the savage . . . . . Religion rests upon fear of more or less unknown powers which everywhere surround the existence of man."<sup>6</sup> Frazer states it thus: "A god is always brought in to play the part of a cause: it is the imperious need of tracing the causes of events which has driven man to discuss or invent a deity."<sup>7</sup>

#### RELATION OF NATURE TO HUMAN LIFE

Early man was impressed by those particular phenomena of nature which seemed most to affect his life. These might be the sun, the rain, the wind, the overflow of a river, or something else. At any rate they would be the elements of his particular environment. The ocean, for example, would not, in the very nature of the case, be expected to play a part in the mythology of the tribes of interior Asia or of Central Africa; but it did play a part in the mythologies of Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia. The annual overflow of a river was a matter of utmost consequence to the people of Egypt; the cause of the periodical rise of the Nile was a mystery, but the people knew that their very lives depended upon it, and the adoration of the Nile inevitably became a part of their religion; but there was no such river to influence the religion of Palestine or Norway or Persia.<sup>8</sup> Again, the occurrence or the failure of the monsoon rains is a matter of plenty or of famine to the people of India, and these seasonal rains could scarcely escape playing a part in the early religions of that country; but to the aborigines of the Amazon Valley, where the rain is so frequent as to be an annoyance, the rain giver might easily be held in disfavor.

#### FRIENDLY AND UNFRIENDLY GODS

A god is beneficent if he gives us what we in our particular environment most feel the need of, and he is malevolent if he withholds it or sends what we do not desire. Happenings over which man has no control may be either beneficial or baneful to him; he can not account for these except on the supposition that there are good deities and evil ones, and so mythologies always involve the existence of friendly gods and unfriendly ones. The *satan* of Egypt, according to Plutarch, was Typhon, a malevolent deity that sent the hot wind and dried up the pools and the soil and parched the vegetation. The *satan* of India was Vritra, the serpent which, in the form of clouds, caught and held back the rain, for the ancient Hindus thought the rain fell from above the clouds and was caught by them. Indra, the beneficent god, pierced them with his lightning and liberated the rain. In Norway the evil deities were the frost giants (or

<sup>6</sup> Bousset, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-37.

<sup>7</sup> J. G. Frazer: *Belief in Immortality* (Gifford Lectures), New York, 1913, Vol. 1, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch considered that Osiris, one of Egypt's two chief deities, originally typified the Nile, and Isis the land of Egypt, and that their wedding was the overflow of the Nile.

mountains) against whom Thor and Odin and other deities waged relentless war.<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising that a primitive people should thus associate the phenomena of nature which benefited them with good deities and the phenomena that injured them with bad deities, and that all this reasoning was influenced by the character of the land and climate in which the people lived.<sup>10</sup>

#### VARIOUS HEAVENS

In all religions that recognize a future life, heaven is a place where happiness is to be had; but man's conception of what complete happiness consists in is inseparable from his mode of life, as well as from his stage of enlightenment. To the American Indian's thought heaven was a hunting-ground, abounding in game, and a place to which dogs as well as men might go. The Indian's conception of paradise was born of his mode of living, and that was a response to his particular environment while he was in a certain stage of development—the hunting stage. But his heaven would not be that of pastoral tribes of steppes, of island fisher folk, of agricultural peoples of flood plains, or of nomads in deserts. When James Bryce visited the lofty plateaus of the Central Andes he wrote: "One is never warm except when actually in the sunlight . . . . The inhabitants get accustomed to these conditions and shiver in their ponchos, but the traveler is rather wretched after sunset and feels how natural was sun-worship in such a country."<sup>11</sup>

#### THE BLESSING OF RAIN

Among the Indian tribes of our Southwest religious ceremonies were notably directed to the securing of rain. The majority of all the ceremonies of the Hopis are for rain and crops, and their prayers to clan or other gods are to secure these things.<sup>12</sup> Summarizing his account of the elaborate ceremonials of the Hopi Indians, whose word for "blessing" is the same as for "rain," Fewkes says:<sup>13</sup> "The necessities of life have driven man into the agricultural condition, and the aridity of the climate has forced him to devise all possible means at his control to so influence his gods as to

<sup>9</sup> "The influence that the outward features of a country exercise upon the thoughts and feelings of men, especially during the vigorous, imaginative, poetic, and prophetic childhood of a nation, can hardly be overestimated. Necessarily, therefore, do we find this influence affecting and modifying a nation's mythology, which is a childlike people's thoughts and feelings, contemplating nature reflected in a system of religion." (R. B. Anderson: *Norse Mythology*, 3rd edit., Chicago, 1879, p. 64.)

<sup>10</sup> "The Vedic poems furnish indisputable evidence that such as this was the origin and growth of Greek and Teutonic mythology. In these poems the names of many, perhaps of most, of the Greek gods indicate natural objects. . . . In them Daphne is . . . the morning twilight . . . ; the cattle of Helios . . . are . . . the light-colored clouds . . . ; Herakles [is] the toiling and struggling sun." (G. W. Cox: *Mythology of the Aryan Nations*, 2 vols., London, 1870; reference in Vol. 1, p. 52.)

<sup>11</sup> James Bryce: *South America: Observations and Impressions*, New York, 1912, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> J. W. Fewkes: *An Interpretation of Katsina Worship*, *Journ. Amer. Folk-Lore*, Vol. 14, 1901, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> J. W. Fewkes: *The Tusayan Ritual*, *Ann. Rept. Smithsonian Inst. for 1895*, pp. 683-700.



force them to send the rains to aid him. Wherever we turn in an intimate study of the ceremonials of the Tusayan Indians, we see the imprint of the arid deserts by which they are surrounded, always the prayer for abundant crops and rains for his parched fields." Each environment will breed its own mode of thought, its own philosophy of life, its own religious beliefs.

#### THE DESERT NOMAD'S PARADISE

In Norse mythology, heaven was a place of warmth and hell a place of cold and mist; but in the religions of Palestine and Arabia, hell is a place of heat—of eternal fire. To the Arab of the desert, paradise was dreamed of as an oasis, or a garden, always having flowing water, shade trees, and fruit. A few of many passages in the Koran will indicate the desert nomad's idea of paradise; Mohammed naturally pictured to his followers the kind of heaven which desert tribes would desire, and so he writes: "This is the description of paradise, which is promised to the pious. It is watered by rivers; its food is perpetual, and its shade also: this shall be the reward of those who fear God; but the reward of the infidel shall be hell-fire."<sup>14</sup> And again: "Those who fear God shall dwell in gardens, amidst fountains."<sup>15</sup> "God will introduce those who shall believe, and act righteously, into gardens through which rivers flow."<sup>16</sup>

This same conception of the fitting place for the good and for the wicked after death was taught by Zoroaster to the Persians more than a thousand years before the Koran was written. In Max Müller's translation of the "Sacred Books of the East" is given Zoroaster's picture of the abode of the wicked after death:<sup>17</sup> "If a person sins, his dwelling place shall be the place on this earth wherein is least water and fewest plants; whereof the ground is cleanest and driest and least passed through by flocks and herds." Plainly, this is a pastoral people's conception.

#### RAIN AND RESURRECTION

Even the Mohammedan's belief in the resurrection of the dead seems to be based upon what he saw about him in his arid environment. He saw the annual death of the sparse vegetation, but later saw this spring into life when the rain came. Mohammed writes: "God sendeth down water from heaven and causeth the earth to revive after it hath been dead. Verily herein is a sign of the resurrection unto people who harken."<sup>18</sup> "Consider therefore the traces of God's mercy; how he quickeneth the earth, after its state of death; verily the same will raise the dead; for he is almighty."<sup>19</sup> "One sign of the resurrection unto them is the dead earth; we quicken the same by the rain, and produce thereout various sort of grain, of which they eat."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Koran, Ch. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 20.

<sup>17</sup> F. Max Müller: *The Sacred Books of the East*, London, 1879-1895, Vol. 4, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Koran, Ch. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 36.



## THE WALLED CITY

To the ancient Hebrew of Palestine, living in an agricultural and pastoral land surrounded by marauding desert tribes and always open to raids, a walled city seems to have been the symbol of safety, a place to which one might flee and find peace and security. Through the association of ideas the Hebrew writers made heaven a walled city with gates of pearl and streets of gold. Such a conception would not occur to people whose warring life and whose environment did not make the walled city a place of security, refuge, and desire.

Whether a people conceive of heaven as a place of eternal rest, or as a garden with shade and flowing water, or as a happy hunting ground, or a walled city, or as a great hall like the Norse Valhalla, where those who die in battle continue to fight for Odin, will naturally depend upon what that particular people regards as the acme of happiness; and this in turn will depend upon the special kinds of discomfort, privation, unhappiness, want, and suffering to which that people is subjected—in short the adverse elements in its environment.

## METAPHORS DRAWN FROM ENVIRONMENT

Religious teachings and doctrines are commonly metaphorical in phraseology. This being the case the metaphors must be drawn from the peoples' environment if they are to be effective.<sup>21</sup> The Founder of Christianity said, "I am the vine; ye are the branches." He probably would not have chosen that phraseology in England or Norway. Referring to his followers he said, "Feed my lambs," "The sheep shall be separated from the goats," "I am the good shepherd and know my sheep," "The shepherd giveth his life for his sheep," "I will send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," and scores of similar expressions. It is said that when the missionaries in Greenland sought to present these passages to the Eskimo they found it necessary to change "sheep" and "lambs" to "seals" and "little seals"; otherwise the figure meant nothing to him. The repeated references of our Bible to the vine, the fig, the olive, the sheep, and the goats, are clearly a response to the environment and mode of life characteristic of Palestine and regions like it. Had the Founder of Christianity lived elsewhere, the parables and the metaphors which he used must have been differently chosen to be made impressive.<sup>22</sup>

## NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Among all of the Teutonic and Celtic peoples trees and groves played a part in religious ideas. According to the ancient Norse mythology the

<sup>21</sup> "In all the phrases which describe India the local coloring arising from the climate of northern India may be plainly discerned." (Cox: *op. cit.*, p. 161.)

<sup>22</sup> "The character of mythical speech must necessarily be modified and its very phrases suggested by the outward features and phenomena of the country. . . . The speech of the tropics . . . would tell rather of splendor than of gloom. . . . But in the frost-bound regions of the North, the speech of the people would, with a peculiar intensity of feeling, dwell on the tragedy of nature." (*Ibid.*, p. 37.)

original man and woman were created from an ash and an elm tree, and Odin's mighty ash, Yggdrasill, supported the universe. Such conceptions were as consistent in the forest lands of northern Europe as was the worship of the Nile in Egypt or of the sun in Peru.

The Norse mythology is notably influenced by the geographical environment, especially the cold climate, wind-swept mountains, and fiorded coast. In warm and sunny Greece mountains were conceived of as a place of delight, fit for gods to dwell in, especially Mt. Olympus and Mt. Ida.<sup>23</sup> In the teachings of Zoroaster also the gods dwell on mountain tops. But these were not the snow-capped, storm-swept, forbidding mountains of Scandinavia. In cold Norway the mountains were regarded as a race of hated giants against whom the gods continually fought; the blows of Thor's hammer, as he smote the giants, made the thunder. Odin's eight-footed horse was the wind from the four cardinal and four semi-cardinal points. Baldur, the best-loved of Odin's sons, was the summer sun that ruled for a short season, only to be slain each winter. Njord was ruler of the ocean winds and restrainer of the sea's fury; while Frey, the son of Njord, presided over rain and sunshine and was the giver of the harvest. Each of the three great Norse festivals was related to the change of the seasons. As Anderson repeatedly points out, the early Norse religion was emphatically a product of the Norseman's land and climate. Although not a geographer and so not viewing things with a geographic eye, he yet holds that all mythology is the impersonation of nature's forces and phenomena. He says: "Not only the mythology considered as a whole, but even the character of its speech and its very words and phrases must necessarily be suggested and modified by the external features of the country."<sup>23</sup> "The harsh climate of the North modified not only the Norse mythology, but also molded indefinitely the national character, and then the two, the mythology and the national character, acted and re-acted upon each other." "Beholding in external nature and in his mythology the struggle of conflicting forces, he naturally looked on life as a field for warfare. The ice-bound fjords and desolate fells, the mournful wail of the waving pine-branches, the stern strife of frost and fire, the annual death of the shortlived summer, made the Norseman somber, if not gloomy in his thoughts, and inured him to the rugged independence of the country. The sternness of the land in which he lived was reflected in his character; the latter was in turn reflected in the tales which he told of his gods and heroes, and thus the Norseman and his mythology mutually influenced each other."<sup>24</sup>

#### CHANGING GODS WITH CLIMATE

Another land in which the climate has features that powerfully influence the life and prosperity of the people is India, with its recurring wet and dry monsoons. If the summer monsoon brought ample rain, crops were

<sup>23</sup> R. B. Anderson: *op. cit.* in footnote 9, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.



abundant, the people were fed, and a degree of comfort prevailed; but if the rains failed, millions of people were hungry and thousands starved. A phenomenon which so controlled the welfare of the people could scarcely escape incorporation into their religion. The influence of this monsoon climate in modifying the religion which the Aryan invaders of India brought with them is most interesting. These invaders came from the arid plateaus northwest of India and entered, as all its invaders by land have entered, at the northwest. The hymns of the Rigveda throw a flood of light upon the character of these ancient Aryans. They were pastoral people and came from a region of little and uncertain rain. In India they became an agricultural people whose harvests were vitally dependent upon a regular recurrence of rain. The change in their environment and mode of life is reflected in their change of religion. When they entered India, their chief deity was Dyaus (Sky); Indra, his son, the rain-giving deity, was of minor rank. As time went on a change took place; gradually Dyaus shrank to a secondary deity, and Indra, the rain-giver, rose to the place of supreme reverence. In his "Outlines of Primitive Belief," Keary says that among the most genuine hymns of the Rigveda about 265 are addressed to Indra, 233 to Agni (Fire), and not over fifty or sixty to Dyaus or some other god.

Here is an example of the displacement of a supreme deity by a subordinate one in response to a change in geographic environment. Indra became the most revered god of the Aryans because, according to their belief, he gave them the essential thing in their existence—rain. Murray says: "In a land with the climatic conditions of India and among agricultural people, it was but natural that the god whose fertilizing showers brought the corn and vine to maturity should be regarded as the greatest of all."<sup>25</sup> A further confirmation is given by Hopkins: "It is impossible for any sober scholar to read the Rigveda and believe that the Vedic poets are not worshiping natural phenomena, or that the phenomena so worshiped were not the original forms of these gods."<sup>26</sup> He believes that climatic environment conditioned the evolution of Hindu theology.

#### FAITH AND PHENOMENA

Keary is authority for the statement that the specialists in every field, Vedic, Persian, Greek, Roman, Teutonic, and Celtic, believe themselves to have discovered that the religious creeds of all these peoples go back to the worship of the phenomena and objects of their natural environment.<sup>27</sup> He goes so far as to declare that never in early times shall we find a god unlinked to external phenomena. "Wherever we turn," says Brinton,<sup>28</sup> "in time or in space to the earliest and simplest religions of the world, we find them

<sup>25</sup> A. S. Murray: *Manual of Mythology*, London, 1873, p. 330.

<sup>26</sup> E. W. Hopkins: *The Religions of India* (*Handbooks on the History of Religions*, edit. by M. Jastrow), Boston, 1895, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> C. F. Keary: *Outlines of Primitive Belief*, New York, 1912, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> D. G. Brinton: *Religions of Primitive Peoples* New York, 1897, p. 9.

dealing with nearly the same objective facts in nearly the same subjective fashion, the differences being due to local and temporal causes." Speaking of the origin of myths, Murray says:<sup>29</sup> "It seems probable that the first phenomena that appealed to the mind were those of the change of the weather or seasons, the revolving day and the revolving year. At any rate, the earliest deities, as well as we can trace them, appear to be those who presided over the movements of the celestial sphere." It is common among comparative mythologists to say that the farther back you trace a myth, the more "atmospheric" the gods become.

Cox considers that the Greek and Norse mythologies sprang from the same Aryan sources; that both have grown up chiefly from names which have been grouped around the sun. The Greek mythology grew mainly out of expressions which describe the recurrence of day and night; the Norse mythology out of those which describe the alternation of summer and winter.<sup>30</sup> The difference seems entirely logical, for in Greece the change from summer to winter was a moderate one; but in Norway it meant the coming on of the long, dreary, sub-Arctic nights with days that had only a few hours of light.

It is said that in practically all religions of the higher order the chief deity is placed in the sky and presides over the phenomena of the sky. "Dyaus, Zeus, Divus, Theos, Deus, Juno, Diana, Dianus, or Janus, with many others, are outgrowths from the same root *dyu*, 'to shine.' "

#### CONCLUSION

In concluding his "Outlines of Primitive Belief," Keary says: "The foregoing chapters must have made it plain that the creed of a people is always greatly dependent upon their position on this earth, upon the scenery amid which their life is passed and the natural phenomena to which they become habituated; that the religion of men who live in woods will not be the same as that of the dwellers in wide, open plains; nor the creed of those who live under an inclement sky, the sport of storms and floods, the same as the religion of men who pass their lives in sunshine and calm air."<sup>31</sup>

It has been the aim of this paper to point out one of the significant influences which give shape to a people's religious beliefs, namely, the influence of geographical environment, and to suggest how logical it is that the religion of the Arab, of the Hindu, of the Egyptian, or of the Inca should reflect the dominant features of their environment. The writer is aware that the environment does not make the religion or necessarily even dominate it, but it inevitably modifies it. "There are," says Fewkes, "certain common components of all cults which are as widely spread as the races of man and exist independently of all surroundings, while there are others which are profoundly affected by environment."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Murray: *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Cox: *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 31, 37, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Keary: *op. cit.*, p. 325.

<sup>32</sup> Fewkes: *op. cit.* in footnote 13, p. 684.













